



Why Do Bad Things Happen?

Courage During Difficult Times

by Dr. Philip Bickel

The Whole World Plays Hurt

Sports commentators praise athletes who play hurt, who give their best though hampered by injuries. Do you know what? The whole world is playing hurt. We keep playing the game of life despite an endless list of hard knocks:

- Families are torn apart by dysfunctions, addictions, abuse, and divorce.
- Workers are stressed by unemployment and low income.
- Terrorist attacks murder innocent people.
- War ravages countries, leaving graves, widows, and orphans.
- Diseases bring pain, suffering, and death.
- Robbery and oppression leave people poor and defenseless.
- Earthquakes and tsunamis leave thousands of victims in their wake.

Add your own difficulties and disappointments to the list. No one is exempt. My personal list of “bad things” includes these items:

1. The death of parents
2. Assorted physical injuries
3. Rebellion and poor decisions of children
4. Under-employment and diminished income
5. The disrespect of colleagues
6. False accusations and slander
7. Burnout and depression
8. Skeletons appearing from the family closet
9. Sandwich generation challenges

Number ten just arrived. I’m writing this in a hospital waiting room while my wife, Julie, is having cancer surgery. I admit that sometimes I’ve buckled under these ten burdens. I’ve wrestled with God. I’ve questioned His faithfulness. Yet, here I am writing this booklet because the Lord has taught me to keep on trusting Him—even in the dark.

When a child gets hurt, he or she pleads, “Mommy, kiss it!” Mom dutifully kisses the bruise, and the child walks away, comforted and assured that everything is better. This works with children, but as adults we want something that will really heal us. Perhaps you picked up this booklet hoping it would give a simple, magic answer to the tribulations of life. Unfortunately, there is no quick remedy to your pain. What I can offer, however, is substantial—the Bible’s answers to these questions:

1. Why do pain and suffering exist?
2. What benefit can possibly come from my troubles?
3. What has God done to deal with the evil and pain in this world?

Senseless suffering is unbearable. Pain with a purpose, however, can be endured with courage. Look at the athlete who punishes his body to compete in the Olympics. Look at the mother who endures childbirth to bring a baby into the world.

Look at the father toiling long, hard hours to support his family. Because their pain has a noble purpose, they are examples of courage, not senseless suffering.

Perhaps the trials you face have left you frustrated, angry, or even bitter. May this booklet give you a new perspective of hope, determination, and joy as you play the game of life hurt.

How Can God Be Good If He Allows All This Evil?

When we contemplate the evil and anguish in the world, it is quite common to complain, “How can a good God allow bad things to happen?” In frustration, some people conclude that either God must be the cause of evil or there isn’t any God at all. Before you draw such conclusions, wouldn’t it be fair to consider the matter from God’s point of view?

The Bible reports that God created the first man and woman with a quality no other creature had—*free will*. They were not robots programmed to follow orders, nor were they slaves obeying out of fear. Instead, our first parents were created perfect and were granted the freedom to choose to love and obey God simply because He was worthy of such respect. Unfortunately, they decided to disobey God, and the result is the troubled, aching world we see today.

At this point you might object: “Are you asking me to believe that old story about Adam and Eve in the garden and the serpent that talked them into eating the forbidden fruit?”

Yes, I am. I know that you might feel like shoving this booklet in the wastebasket, but please hear me out. It can’t hurt to keep reading to gain a complete picture of what the Bible says about evil.

We generally view freedom as positive, don’t we? We cheer when an oppressive regime yields to the will of the people. We delight to see poor people enjoy a quality education and good-paying jobs. We take pleasure in innovative artists who refuse to be limited to tired old styles. Desiring to give us true freedom, God created Adam and Eve with free will. If He hadn’t, we would all be robots, and no one would like that.

Although you may find it hard to accept the Bible’s story of humanity’s fall into sin, the present day evidence supports it:

- God does not manufacture bombs and drop them on cities. Humans do!
- God does not misuse the tillable land of the earth, resulting in famines and malnutrition. People do.
- God does not abuse children. People do.
- God does not transmit the HIV/AIDS virus. People do.
- God has not invented a million and one ways to sin. We have!

It hurts our pride to admit it, but the blame lies with us. We constantly seek our own selfish purposes at the expense of others. Try as we may, we have not and cannot create a utopian civilization.

After Adam and Eve disobeyed, God told them life would be hard. Adam would have to toil to support his family; Eve would experience pain in childbirth. And worst of all, when their lives had run their tired courses, they would die. Death is the ultimate and certain tragedy stalking each of us. None of us are going to get out of here alive. Every human death adds to the mounting evidence that men and women are tainted with evil, and that life on this earth is not as God originally intended it to be.

What Is God Doing While We Suffer?

Even if suffering and pain are our fault, what is God doing about the problem? Has He washed His hands of the matter and abandoned us to the fate of annihilating ourselves? No. God is gravely concerned about our suffering. In the Bible, the Lord promises to take three separate actions to deal with evil.

First, God tells us that, unlike an overly

permissive parent, He will not overlook injustice. Evil people often seem to be winning the day, while good people are crushed in the dust. However, God promises a day will come when He will judge all people with justice, and all outstanding penalties will be paid.

Second, God promised Adam and Eve and further generations that He would send a Savior to resolve the problem of evil and sin. The Lord fulfilled this promise in the Person and ministry of His Son, Jesus Christ. This is the central teaching of the whole Bible, and we will consider it in detail later on.

Third, God makes a startling promise in Romans 8:28: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.” This verse claims God will take all the events of our lives, including the bad things, the disasters, and the trials, and bring good out of them. Disasters and trials do not come from God. They are the result of the sinful choices made by humans. Yet, God is so wise and powerful that He can take the bad stuff that happens to us and work it out for our good. Like a master artist, He can take junk and turn it into something beautiful.

This promise sounds almost unbelievable, doesn't it? Many talk as if their lives were ruled by blind fate, but this is not so. God continues to love us in spite of our disobedience. How does God work this miracle of making things work out for good? That is the subject of the next few sections.

Pain: God's Bullhorn

When troubles oppress us, often we ask ourselves, “Is God punishing me?” We hunt for the exact sin that might have caused our present problems. However, in most cases it would be more beneficial to ask, “Is God warning me?” You see, sometimes God allows us to endure troubles in order to warn us of the foolishness of living without Him and to call us back to Him.

Jeff and Reid were university students who stole thousands of dollars' worth of merchandise. When the police started to catch on to their activities, Jeff moved to another city where he became a drug dealer. Eventually, Jeff became an addict himself, experiencing uncontrollable drug flashbacks and hallucinations. After three years, Jeff moved back and hoped to team up with Reid again, only to discover that Reid had become a follower of Jesus Christ. For a couple years, Jeff mocked Reid incessantly, hoping he would revert to his old ways. Instead, Reid held his ground and often told Jeff that Jesus could help him, too.

Although Jeff didn't want anything to do with religion, he found an honest job and hoped to forget his sordid past, but nightmarish drug recurrences plagued him. Finally, one night as Jeff lay awake at 3 a.m. with his mind tormented by drug flashbacks, he decided to take his own life. But as he went to the kitchen to get a knife, he suddenly recalled Reid had claimed Jesus could help him. Even though Jeff did not really know who Jesus was, he shouted in desperation: “Jesus, help me!”

A warm glow filled him, and he fell sound asleep. The next day he began to read the Bible, and within the week Jeff came to know Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior.

Were Jeff's drug flashbacks simply a punishment, as though God was yelling at him: “Take that, you lousy drug pusher”? No, the Lord had a much nobler purpose in mind. He was allowing Jeff to experience such agony so he would seek Him and discover how much God loves him. As long as things are going well, we rest contentedly in our rebellion and foolishness. Pain, on the other hand, demands our full and immediate attention. Let me paraphrase what C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Problem of Pain*: God whispers to us through our pleasures, speaks through our conscience, but shouts by means of our pain. Pain is God's bullhorn to rouse a deaf world.

So, when you consider your personal trials, don't ask yourself, “Is God punishing me?” Instead ask, “Is the Lord warning and calling me—as He called Jeff—to humbly turn to Him and receive His kindness and love?” Our afflictions have a purpose. Often God uses pain as a bullhorn to rouse a deaf world. Are you listening?

Refined Like Silver

Have you ever observed someone refining silver? The silversmith places the precious metal over an intense flame until it melts. With the utmost patience, he must sit for a long time, periodically removing the impurities that rise to the top, until the silver is pure and fit to be fashioned into a beautiful work of art. The Bible says that God is like a refiner who sits and purifies silver (see Malachi 3:3). When we are tried by fire, the Lord can remove the impurities of sin from our character and make us into something exquisitely beautiful.

How does the silversmith know when all the impurities have been refined from the silver? He knows when he can see his own face reflected in the smooth surface of the molten metal. That is God's goal as well. He allows trials to come our way, not to hurt us or discourage us, but so the image of our faithful Father will be seen more clearly in our lives. Then, we will recognize that God does indeed work out all things for our good.

The Bible tells the story of Jacob, a fellow who always looked out for himself and was an expert at tricking others. How did God refine Jacob? The Lord allowed him to be deceived by his uncle. Finally, the discipline had its effect, and the impurity of deception was removed from Jacob's character.

Once there was a couple that took great pride in their well-behaved children and secretly criticized parents who seemed unable to control their kids. Then, God saw fit to bless that couple with another child who was strong-willed and free-spirited. By means of this unruly child, the parents learned humility and were able to empathize with parents who had independent children.

God allows trials to come to us so we become refined and more compassionate people. Our problem is that often we do not want to be improved. This attitude is aptly illustrated in the Argentine comic strip "Mafalda." The character Felipe never wants to do his homework. One day he imagines himself at the front door where a salesman offers him Willpower Pep Pills. Felipe buys the pills and after taking them, jubilantly shouts, "They're fantastic! I can't wait to do homework!" Right then, he is awakened from his daydream by the ringing of the doorbell. Believing that the salesman from his daydream is actually standing at the door, Felipe jumps up screaming, "No matter who it is, Mom, I'm not at home!" Often, we are like Felipe—children who do not want to receive the discipline necessary to grow up and become responsible.

A good father disciplines his son not because he dislikes him, but because he loves him and wants him to be successful in life.

Similarly, our heavenly Father disciplines us for our good so that we might share in His holiness. This is why the Bible advises us: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2-4).

Exemplary Suffering

When people are suffering, they often think of the ancient story of Job. He was a fellow who knew what it meant to be down and out. At one time Job had been prosperous, but in a single day all his riches were destroyed and his children died in a furious windstorm. Then he was infected with a disease that left him covered with painful sores. All he had left was his wife, and her only advice was "Curse God and die!" (Job 2:9b). To this "he replied, 'You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?' In all this, Job did not sin in what he said" (Job 2:10).

Three friends came to visit Job, insisting that God must be punishing him for a skeleton in his closet or some horrendous secret wrong. But the friends were mistaken. Job had done nothing wrong to deserve the harsh treatment he received. What then was the reason for his affliction? Job is history's most famous case of exemplary suffering.

God permitted Satan to oppress Job in order to demonstrate the strength of Job's faith. Remember, there is a war going on between God and Satan. When Satan tempted Adam and Eve to distrust God, he gained human beings as allies in this war. Whenever we experience troubles, Satan tempts us to curse God, just as Job's wife urged Job to do. Like soldiers on the battlefield, we may at times be called on to experience trials and afflictions. When we accept them with faith as Job did, we demonstrate to the world that Satan is a deceiver and God is the One who truly loves us.

Job's example of courageous faith has had far-reaching effects. In the midst of his sufferings, Job pleaded, "Oh, that my words were recorded, that they were written on a scroll" (Job 19:23). God fulfilled Job's request, for millions have been comforted by his story, which appears in the world's most widely read book, the Bible.

There are many modern-day Jobs. Take, for example, Tony Dungy, former coach of the Indianapolis Colts. In December 2005, Tony's 18-year-old son, James, died of an apparent suicide, following bouts with depression. To experience such a tragedy in private is painful enough, but as the coach of a football team that was 13-0, Tony was under the microscope of the media. How could he survive? Well, Tony and his wife Lauren are Christians, and though the anguish of their loss was extreme, they continued to trust in the Lord.

Tony Dungy's endurance under extreme duress has brought hope to others who read about his problems. Several grieving parents have contacted Tony, asking him how to endure the death of a child. Even though Tony didn't know these people, he graciously responded to their pleas, and he continues to encourage them as he is able.

In this case and in countless others, we see how God uses exemplary suffering to bring about good. The Lord "comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God" (2 Corinthians 1:4).

God Has a Better Idea

If there was ever a guy who had a right to think God had deserted him, it was Joseph. His ten older brothers couldn't stand the sight of him because their dad preferred him above the rest. One day, when they were all far away from the old man, the ten older ones decided to kill Joseph. While they were discussing the details of how to do him in, they got a better idea. A caravan of traders happened by, and the ten brothers sold Joseph into slavery. Surely, they figured, he wouldn't live long as a slave, and the guilt for his death would be on someone else's head.

Dragged off to a foreign land, Joseph was bought by a royal official. The official took notice of Joseph's honesty and administrative abilities and placed him in charge of his mansion.

Just when Joseph's situation appeared to be improving, things began to go badly. His boss's wife wanted to have an affair with him. Being a man of principle, however, Joseph wouldn't go near her. Miffed by his refusal, she told her husband that Joseph had tried to rape her, and Joseph was pitched into prison.

At that point, no one would have blamed Joseph if he had deserted his faith and screamed, "There is no God! Or, if there is, He's the devil himself!" But that's not what happened. Joseph did not give up on God. More importantly, God did not give up on Joseph. You see, God had a plan to create good out of the bad things that happened to Joseph.

A few years later, the king of the land had a dream that disturbed him a great deal. No one in the land could interpret the dream—no one, that is—except Joseph. The dream had two parts: first, seven fat cows were eaten up by seven skinny cows. Then seven full ears of corn were devoured by seven scrawny ears. God revealed to Joseph the meaning of the dream: after seven years of bumper crops, the land would experience seven years of famine. The king was so impressed by Joseph's explanation that he made him his top official. Joseph was placed in charge of storing the surplus of the seven prosperous years so people could survive the seven years of famine.

Well, when the famine arrived, guess who showed up in search of grain? You guessed it—Joseph's ten famished brothers. Now, if this were a Hollywood movie, Joseph would have reaped revenge, subjecting his brothers to ten ghastly, gory, gruesome deaths. The true story, however, is much more dramatic. With tears in his eyes, Joseph forgave them and said, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20).

The Bible promises, "And we know that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28). This does not mean those who trust God will never suffer. It means they will never suffer without a purpose. Evil people may cause all sorts of suffering and conflict, but God promises to make their purposes backfire and result in blessing.

As Joseph sat in his jail cell, he did not know exactly what good would result from his plight. Nonetheless, he trusted God would keep His Word. In your case, if you answer God's call to trust in Christ as your Savior from sin, you can rest assured God is caring for you, and you will never experience trials without a purpose.

In the midst of what seem to be insurmountable difficulties, do not turn away from God. Rather draw closer to Him and trust in His promise from the Bible: "... God is faithful; He will not let you be tested beyond what you can bear. But when you are tested, He will also provide a way out so that you can endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13b).

God Has Scars, Too

We all know of people who have suffered unjustly, but let me tell you about the Man who was treated more unfairly than anyone else in history. He didn't deserve the miserable fate that crushed Him. He spent His life in service to others, reaching out to the sick with healing, to the lonely with love, and to the guilt-ridden with mercy. Everywhere He went, crowds followed Him because His compassionate attitude, words, and actions soothed their aching hearts.

You would think everyone would admire a guy like that, but He had His enemies. They bribed one of His friends to turn Him over to the police. Then they put Him on trial for crimes He'd never committed. The kangaroo court came to the attention of two government officials who had the authority to set Him free. One ridiculed Him; the other washed his hands of the whole business, leaving the innocent Man to die an agonizing death.

Who was this poor Man? His Name is Jesus. But this is only half the story. The greatest agony He endured could not be seen. The Bible teaches that as Christ suffered on the cross of Calvary, God the Father placed upon Him all our sins—all the evil and guilt of the entire human race. Someone who grasped this truth was the Dutch painter Rembrandt. In 1633, he painted "The Raising of the Cross." Helping the Roman soldiers to hoist up Jesus on the cross is a man in a blue painter's beret. That man is Rembrandt—a self-portrait. By painting himself as one of the executioners, Rembrandt admitted that his sins, too, contributed to Christ's death.

On the cross, Jesus suffered all the punishment you and I deserve for our disobedience of God's will. What a bum rap! We should have been executed. We should have been crucified. We should have been sentenced to exile in hell. But Jesus took it all in our place. Why did Jesus do it? Was He forced to suffer against His will? Jesus declared, "No one takes it [My life] from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. ..." (John 10:18a). He gave His life so that we wouldn't have to pay the price for our sins. As a brave soldier sacrifices his life to save his buddies, Jesus willingly laid down His innocent life to free you and me from the eternal punishment we deserve.

Do you understand now? God's help goes far beyond a mother's kiss and saying everything is okay, when it really isn't. God actually makes all things turn out right. This is not the childish dreaming of gullible people. It is the Gospel truth! God graciously forgives each and every one of us who will confess our disobedience and accept that Christ died for our sins. While we suffer in this troubled world, what has God done to help us? He has experienced the greatest suffering Himself. We can trust wholeheartedly in Jesus Christ because He is the only God with scars. He knows what it is like to suffer. He understands. He is able to sympathize with our every weakness and comfort us with His profound kindness and compassion. With this understanding, our trials, as difficult as they may be, diminish in their harshness.

A woman named Sarah had seven children and an alcoholic husband. She struggled to hold the family together while inside she felt like running away. Then, she became a believer in Christ. Although her problems didn't disappear, God gave her strength to face them. One day a skeptical neighbor told Sarah, "Your religion is nothing more than a drug to keep you from feeling how painful life is."

Sarah answered, "My Savior, a drug? Not at all! Drugs make people weak and addicted. People take them to avoid their problems. But look at me. Since I met Jesus, have I become weaker and less able to deal with life? No. The love of God empowers me to love my husband and children no matter how hard life is."

God the Father has even more good news for us! He raised His Son Jesus from the dead. He promises similar victory over death to all who will turn from their sins and trust in Christ to forgive them. He will raise us from the dead and give us new bodies that will never know suffering again. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain ..." (Revelation 21:4a). That is what heaven will be like.

About heaven the apostle Paul writes, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18). When we get to heaven, we won't say, "Is this all there is? I went through all those trials and suffering for this?" We won't be disappointed because the sorrows of this world will pale in comparison with the glory of that life awaiting those who trust in Jesus Christ to make them right with God. Our time here is only the first few strums on the guitar before the eternal song begins and the dancing starts.

Comfort for Julie

Near the beginning of this booklet, I mentioned I was in a waiting room while my wife, Julie, was undergoing surgery. I've asked Julie to share what God has been teaching her during her illness.

This is what Julie had to say: "From the initial diagnosis of cancer to treatment and beyond, it can seem like a long process. After the surgeon removed the cancerous tissue, I began six-and-a-half weeks of daily radiation therapy. I am in the middle of that therapy now.

"Sometimes I feel strong and sense God's presence. At other times, I feel sad and vulnerable. But how I feel at the moment does not alter the certainty of God's love and His promises.

"This experience is teaching me to express my physical and emotional needs to close friends, rather than try to 'soldier on.' When I feel weak, it does me no good to deny it or fight it. When I admit I'm not feeling well, I recognize more clearly my rest is in Jesus. Then I take a deep breath, put my feet up, and relax.

"Keeping a sense of humor helps when people say unusual things. A friend asked me, 'How does radiation work? Do you just lie down and they kill you with X-rays?' As soon as the words came out, she felt so embarrassed. We laughed together as I gave a brief explanation of the process of therapy.

"I've told my husband and others how much I appreciate their prayers to God on my behalf. Especially when they pray aloud in my presence, I feel so blessed as I pray along silently. In the radiation therapy waiting room, I'm getting to know people I never would have met otherwise. We encourage each other, and God has given me opportunities to tell them about His constant care in the midst of trials like cancer.

"My appointments at radiation therapy are daily reminders that I am mortal. While many people are ignoring the fact they are going to die someday, I can't escape it. But that is a blessing because it leads me to lean even more on God's promises. Jesus said, 'For My Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day' (John 6:40). Yes!!"

God Wants to Comfort You

We have seen that God brings good out of suffering in five different ways:

1. Pain works as a bullhorn, warning us to turn back to the God of love.
2. As fire refines silver, God refines our character through trials.
3. Like Job, some endure sufferings so that their example may teach others of God's faithfulness.
4. The Lord may allow us to go through trials that will ultimately turn out more favorable for us than we ever could have imagined.
5. Jesus Christ willingly endured the harshest suffering in our place.

All this proves that "in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose." What is God's purpose? It is to restore people to a living relationship with Him. He actively calls everyone to be reconciled to Him and to know His love. The Lord is calling you right now so you may find comfort in His forgiving love. To respond to His love, all you need to do is repent of your sins and place your confidence in Christ.

The following questions will help you determine where you stand with God:

- Do you believe Jesus Christ died to forgive all the wrong that people do, including your own disobedience?
- Do you desire the full and free forgiveness Christ has won for you on the cross?
- Do you wish to live with God, guiding all the events of your life for good?
- Do you desire the certainty of knowing you have eternal life in heaven?

If these are your sincere beliefs and desires, then tell God how you feel. You can do this in your own words, or by using the following thoughts:

Heavenly Father, although the world is full of strife and pain, I know that You are not to blame for it. I confess to You with a heavy heart that I am guilty; I also have sinned against Your will. But I thank You, Father, for sending Your Son, Jesus Christ, to take upon Himself the eternal punishment that I, and all others, deserve. I believe Jesus died for my sins, and I ask You to forgive me in Christ's Name. Help me, by Your Holy Spirit, to renew my faith in You each day, no matter how tough my life may be. Although I may not understand the meaning of every problem that comes my way, I believe You have a plan for my life, and You will work it out for my good. Thank You for Your daily care and comfort. Amen.

Rest assured, God accepts you as His forgiven child. "... the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:7b-9).

To grow in your faith, you are invited to explore God's Word and discover more about His love for you. For a more detailed discussion of the question of why bad things happen, read Philip Yancey's excellent book, *Where Is God When It Hurts?*

In conclusion, consider the great French painter, Pierre Renoir, and his crippling arthritis. One day, a friend watching him paint pondered how the artist could endure such excruciating agony with every stroke. The friend asked, "How can you paint at the expense of such torture?" Renoir replied, "The pain passes, but the beauty remains."

You have learned that God works some good purpose out of every heartache, every tear, and every misfortune. Through our trials, God warns us and calls us to Himself. He disciplines us for our own good. He guides us through difficult times so that all may turn out to be a blessing in the end. And He grants to some the honor of demonstrating their faith in Him in the midst of sorrow. One day you will look back and see that your time of suffering was just a brief period of preparation for the never-ending joys of heaven. Never forget, dear friend, "The pain passes, but the beauty remains."

Notes

Dr. Bickel has a passion for encouraging and assisting people in sharing the Gospel message in their daily lives. His desire is to walk with the Lord, listen for His voice, and obey what He says to do. He seeks to demonstrate the love of Christ in action and speak His love in words and blessing and good news.



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